

# Degrees by Design

Liberal Studies offers path for eclectic learners — by Brian J. Bowe

Annamarie Buller is a busy woman on the Grand Rapids art scene. Her Heartside District loft doubles as an art gallery, and she's a veteran organizer of gallery shows in empty spaces along Division Avenue and Wealthy Street. But her work transcends gallery walls — she is a volunteer coordinator for the Grand Rapids Symphony, and she has helped distribute economic development grants for her neighborhood.

Buller, 28, is still working on her bachelor's degree at Grand Valley, having spent time in and out of college for the last decade. "I really couldn't fully give over to the undergrad college thing because it feels so isolated from real life and from practical experience. I would take all these classes and get

frustrated because we could be applying our knowledge directly in the community," she said.

But Buller has found an intellectual home in Grand Valley's Liberal Studies, where she is a major. That program has allowed to pursue — and integrate — her twin passions of art and community organizing. Through a course of study that she designed herself, she has taken art, sociology, philosophy and nonprofit administration classes with a goal of making her a better community organizer — a field she discovered after working as an Americorps volunteer for the Dwelling Place, a nonprofit organization in Grand Rapids.

"I saw all of these ways that planning and art and community organizing can come together — getting people from all these

different sectors sitting at one table discussing," Buller said. "For example, affordable housing is what Dwelling Place does, but affordable housing needs all sorts of businesses and all different income levels."

Those kinds of connections are what Liberal Studies is all about. It offers a path for returning adult students and students whose interests don't fit neatly into established programs. Graduates from Liberal Studies — as the program is often called — have found their way to careers in business, law, the arts and academia.

The main feature of the Liberal Studies major is that students design a large part of their program, said Judy Whipps, associate professor of philosophy and the chair of the department. "I tell people

that it prepares students more for the real world, because we focus on the applied area. We try to integrate the learning with the student's own life, with their community, and with their future vocation. We stress those integrative skills," she said.

Whipps said the typical Liberal Studies student has tried a couple of majors before coming to her office. "Students actually have a hard time finding us — there's really no preparation in high school for this kind of program. Nobody says, 'I'm going to go to college and major in Liberal Studies,'" Whipps quipped. "Usually people find us in their junior year — or sometimes even in between their junior and senior year — when they become frustrated with trying to figure out where they fit



within the academic system.”

Whipps said that sense of frustration is common among Liberal Studies students, and it comes from trying to reconcile their interests with the academic system.

“I think it starts with advising, trying to find a way to hear them and their own self-expression,” Whipps said. “If students discover themselves in the advising process and realize they’ve been on a path, just not a traditional path, they light up. We help them see that they’ve really been following their own interests. They see themselves, and that’s a real start for education, because then they are excited about growing that and building on that.”

The program has its roots in William James College, one of Grand Valley’s cluster colleges of

yore, said philosophy professor Stephen Rowe. “William James College was organized — as the current Liberal Studies program is — around themes, topics, issues, instead of around the traditional disciplines,” Rowe said. “Liberal Studies essentially has two functions. One is integrative — to cultivate the citizenly or holistic perspective. The other is to insist on liberal education as a pedagogy rather than a subject matter, which is a distinction that is super, super crucial and very delicate.”

The values of liberal education are infused throughout Grand Valley, Rowe said, including in the university’s mission statement and the university-wide General Education Program. The Liberal Studies program holds at its core this approach to education that

stresses transformation rather than merely information.

“It emphasizes the tradition of liberal education as one of the world’s great transformative practices,” Rowe said. “All of the great traditions agree, more or less, that the mature human being doesn’t just pop out of the natural process; that a second nature needs to be cultivated. For trees and flowers, if you leave them alone, the mature form will just unfold out of the natural process. But for human beings, some intervention is required.”

## Learning How to Learn

Whipps is not merely head of the department, she is also one of its own success

*photo by Bernadine Carey-Tucker*

**From left, Pennie Johnson, Liz Smith and Annamarie Buller each found an academic home in Grand Valley’s Liberal Studies program.**

stories. She earned a bachelor’s degree in Liberal Studies in 1992, after returning to school in her late 30s.

“I had gone to school at four or five universities, and LIB 100 (Introduction to Liberal Studies) was the first course I took when I came back. It just made all kinds of sense to me. It really changed my life,” Whipps said “It opened up my world to suddenly see what I could do and that this is who I was. It became a personal journey. I didn’t think of it so much as a job-related thing.”

Whipps said she has become personally invested in the



*photo by Amanda Pitts*

Kelly Halloran brought a wealth of life experience to her coursework in Liberal Studies.

Liberal Studies program. “I am pretty passionate about this program — not just because of my story, but because of what I’ve seen, how I’ve seen students come alive to really claim the educational process. It’s just such a joy,” she said.

One such student was alumna Liz Smith, who dabbled with majors in art and writing as a freshman before switching to Lib Studies. She called that “an intellectual awakening.” That awakening didn’t just change what Smith learned, it changed how she learned. Before she found the Liberal Studies Department, Smith said: “I felt like I was a passive, immature and uncertain kind of student. I had a low idea of what I was capable of.”

That changed with the Liberal Studies program’s focus on student engagement. “It’s all about engaging and making your education an active pursuit,” Smith said.

“I’m a very active person, and it gave me an opportunity to engage my own education.”

Smith’s emphasis looked at cross-cultural perspectives on gender, and her course load included classes in sociology, anthropology, criminal justice, and Women and Gender Studies. She also studied abroad in England as part of her International Relations minor.

After graduating from Grand Valley, Smith joined the Peace Corps, where she served in Senegal. She said her Liberal Studies program prepared her well for the Peace Corps by helping her develop respect for diverse cultures and her commitment to inclusion. “I think the term ‘generalist’ is sometimes misunderstood, but I believe that Liberal Studies prepared me to be a generalist, but also a very proactive and community-oriented person,” she said.

Another Lib Studies alumna,

Pennie Johnson, is an attorney working as an associate at Varnum, Riddering, Schmidt and Howlett, LLP. She graduated cum laude from University of Michigan Law School in 2007. She is living proof that a Liberal Studies degree can be the first step on the path to a fruitful career. Like many Liberal Studies students, Johnson’s path started off with a false start.

“I was going into journalism when I started, and I took a couple classes and realized it wasn’t for me,” Johnson said.

She began taking courses in the School of Public and Nonprofit Administration, and she also developed a love for philosophy. Working with Whipps, she created an emphasis in social control, which Johnson described as “a shorthand way of saying I was interested in the way people and the state interact and the way society has interpreted the balance between those two over

time and between cultures.”

She didn’t realize it at the time, but she was engaging in perfect preparation for law school. “Basically all law is that dynamic. I was really interested in this, and I had never even thought about being a lawyer. The program allowed me to engage in that discipline before I even knew I wanted to do it.”

## Many Paths

For Kelly Halloran, the route to Grand Valley was far more circuitous. She spent time at four other schools in Michigan and Colorado when she wasn’t competing as a snowboarder. She soured on her original dream of studying to become an athletic director and majored in international relations, business, and anthropology. At 18, she moved to Colorado all by herself. “That’s a huge reality check when you’re 1,500 miles away from everybody you know, with no job and no money,” she said. “That made me mature a considerable amount.”

Along the way, the Lansing-area native traveled a lot, exploring local cultures and communities in places from California to New York, as well as across Mexico, Canada and Europe. “I moved to Grand Rapids on a whim,” she said. But once she found her way to the Liberal Studies program, she found her niche.

She worked as an intern at the Van Andel Global Trade Center, where her diverse experience made her an attractive candidate for an internship. “I think Kelly’s specific experience prior to coming back and re-engaging with her educational path allowed her to explore some opportunities out there,” said Sonja Johnson, executive

# Lib Studies expands in Holland

director of the Van Andel Global Trade Center. “It allowed her a lot more creative exploration than she would have had in a traditional program.”

After graduating in 2007, Halloran landed a job as an international trade specialist at Haworth, Inc. She focuses on the compliance aspect of importing and exporting around the world. “The sector of international business that I’m in is not really well-known by college students,” Halloran said. “I learned that aspect of business from my work at the trade center. Sonja really was a great mentor.”

Wolfram Hentschel is open about the reason he was first attracted to Lib Studies — time. “This is going to sound really bad, but I wanted to get the fastest degree possible because I wanted to get back out into the workforce,” he said.

Hentschel came to Grand Valley after spending 21 years in the Army. He already had an associate’s degree in Russian Studies from the University of Maryland. “I had the G.I. Bill to help me pay for it, and it was a good time in my life for me to take the time to finish my bachelor’s degree,” he said.

Hentschel realized that the program would take into account his life experience — including deployments to Bosnia, Kosovo, Egypt, South Korea and Germany — into consideration. “I came here with a lot of experience. They took a lot of my service school and gave me credit for it,” he said. “I was able to take what I’ve learned in life and the skills that I already have and mesh it with academic learning. If I would have gone to another program, I would have to start all over.”

Hentschel graduated in

April and is now looking for work as a corporate diversity manager — a position he held for three years in the military.

Because of the introspection required by the program, many who have been through it say it helped them discover their greater purpose in life.

“In high school I was very active in the community, I have always been involved in volunteerism, and I never had confidence nor the platform to pursue an intellectual life. I feel like the Lib Studies program provided the intellectual background for this community outreach work,” Smith said. “That was such a gift. That’s something that I’m really indebted to Grand Valley for.”

Halloran agreed, noting that some consider liberal studies to be a “frivolous degree.” She said she found great value in the introspection required by the program. “You spend a considerable amount of time finding yourself and your purpose,” she said. “The last year-and-a-half at Grand Valley was by far the most advantageous part of my education.”

The Liberal Studies major is one of the more popular majors that Grand Valley offers in Traverse City, and now the university also offers it on the Meijer Campus in Holland.

For the first time, the full range of Liberal Studies courses are offered in Holland — including the senior seminar capstone class. The expansion of Liberal Studies into Holland is an outgrowth of a partnership with Grand Rapids Community College to expand academic program offerings for the Lakeshore community to help non-traditional students earn degrees. The new initiative is aimed primarily at adults who have already earned some college credits.

“One of our missions is accessibility,” said Judy Whipps. “We try to work with people who have alternative backgrounds and different ways of learning and try to figure out how that fits in a traditional academic setting.”

GRCC offers general education courses on the Meijer Campus. The partnership takes advantage of existing consortium

arrangements to include financial aid, equivalent courses and concurrent enrollment. Whipps said the option of taking courses through GRCC is attractive for returning adult students.

“We’re really able to allow students who perhaps couldn’t come right back to Grand Valley work with GRCC to renew their skills and finish college,” Whipps said.

The program allows students to build on what they have already completed, whether at Grand Valley or any other accredited college or university. It also lets students build a unique degree that suits their own interests. The program offers convenient, flexible, and alternative formats and scheduling options.

Grand Valley has been offering courses in Holland since the 1980s and expanded its Holland offerings when the university’s Meijer Campus opened in 1997. Information on the new program is available at the Meijer Holland Campus, 515 Waverly Road, or by phone at (616) 394-4848.

*photo by Amanda Pitts*

**Stephen Rowe: Liberal Studies “stresses transformation, rather than merely information.”**

